

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

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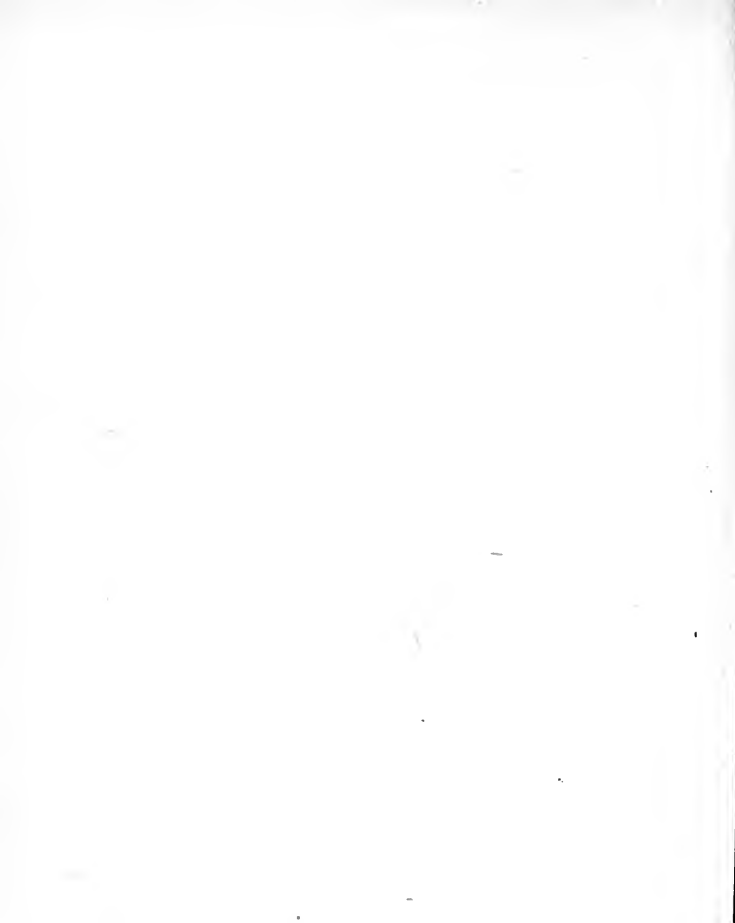


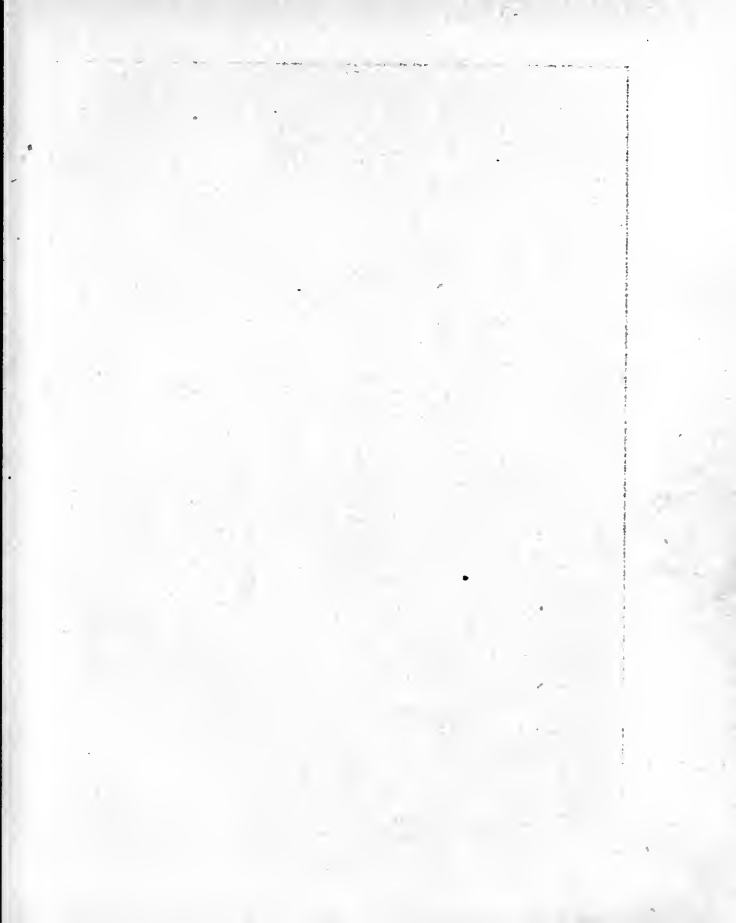


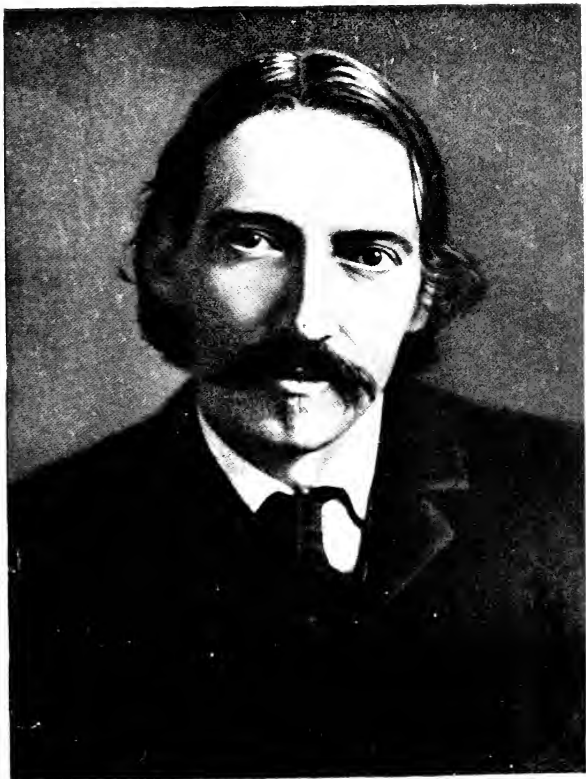




*Robert Louis
Stevenson*







*From Photo by
Nelson, Boston.*

Robert Louis Stevenson.

Robert Louis Stevenson

BY

W. ROBERTSON NICOLL

AND

G. K. CHESTERTON



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The Personality and Style of Robert Louis Stevenson

BY W. ROBERTSON NICOLL

*A*S the years pass they disengage the virtue of a writer, and decide whether or not he has force enough to live. Will Stevenson live? Undoubtedly. He is far more secure of immortality than many very popular writers. The sale of his books may not be great, and he may even disappear from the marts of literature now and then, but he will always be

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revived, and it may turn out that his reputation may wear as well as that of Charles Lamb. For he engages his readers by the double gift of personality and style.

The personality of Stevenson is strangely arresting. In the first place it was a double personality. In his journey to the Cevennes he reflects that every one of us travels about with a donkey. In his "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," the donkey becomes a devil. Every Jekyll is haunted by his Hyde. Somebody said that "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" showed Stevenson as Poe, with the addition of a moral sense. Critics may differ as to the exact literary

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value of the famous little book, but as an expression of Stevenson's deepest thought about life it will retain its interest. He was not content to dwell in a world where the lines are drawn clear, where the sheep are separated from the goats. He would have a foot in both worlds, content to dwell neither wholly with the sheep nor wholly with the goats. No doubt his ruling interest was in ethical problems, and he could be stern in his moral judgments, as, for example, in his discussion of the character of Burns. He was by nature and training religious, "something of the Shorter Catechist." His earliest publication was a defence of the Covenanters, and in his last days he established

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close friendships with the Samoan missionaries. Yet he was by no means "orthodox," either in ethics or in religion. Much as he wrote on conduct, there were certain subjects, and these the most difficult, on which he never spoke out. On love, for example, and all that goes with it, it is quite certain that he never spoke his full mind—to the public at least.

Another very striking quality in his personality was his fortitude. He was simply the bravest of men. Now and then, as in his letter to George Meredith, he let us see under what disabling conditions he fought his battle. Human beings in a world like this are naturally drawn to one who suffers, and will not

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let himself be mastered or corrupted by suffering. They do not care for the prosperous, dominant, athletic, rich and long-lived man. They may conjecture, indeed, that behind all the bravery there is much hidden pain, but if it is not revealed to them they cannot be sure. They love Charles Lamb for the manner in which he went through his trial, and they love him none the less because he was sometimes overborne, because on occasions he stumbled and fell. Charlotte Brontë was an example of fortitude as remarkable as Stevenson, but she was not brave after the same manner. She allowed the clouds to thicken her life and make it grey. Stevenson sometimes found himself in the dust, but he

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recovered and rose up to speak fresh words of cheer. He took thankfully and eagerly whatever life had to offer him in the way of affection, of kindness, of admiration. Nor did he ever in any trouble lose his belief that the Heart of things was kind. In the face of all obstacle he went steadily on with his work, nor did he ever allow himself to fall below the best that he could do. An example so touching, so rare, so admirable, is a reinforcement which weary humanity cannot spare.

With these qualities, and, indeed, as their natural result, Stevenson had a rare courtesy. He was in the words of the old Hebrew song, "lovely and pleasant," or rather, as Robertson Smith translated

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*Robert Louis Stevenson
at the age of 15.*



*Robert Louis Stevenson
at the age of 20.*



*From a Photo kindly supplied by
Mr. Graham Balfour.*

*Robert Louis Stevenson at the house of the
Hon. B. R. Wise, Sydney.*

it, "lovely and winsome," in all his bearings to men of all kinds, so long as they did not fall under the condemnation of his moral judgment. With a personality so rich, Stevenson had the power of communicating himself. He could reveal his personality without egotism, without offence. Many writers of charming individuality cannot show themselves in their books. There is as little of themselves in their novels as there would be in a treatise on mathematics, if they could write it. Perhaps less. There have been mathematicians like Augustus de Morgan, who could put humour and personality into a book on geometry.

But Stevenson had not only a

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personality, he had a style. His golden gift of words can never be denied. He may sometimes have been too "precious," but the power of writing as he could write is so uncommon that he must always stand with a very few. We believe that Stevenson's style is largely an expression of his courtesy. He wished as a matter of mere politeness and goodwill to express himself as well as he could. In fact, it was this courtesy that led him to his famous paradox about the end of art, his characterisation of the artist as the Son of Joy. "The French have a romantic evasion for one employment, and call its practitioners the Daughters of Joy. The artist is of the same family ; he is of the Sons of Joy,

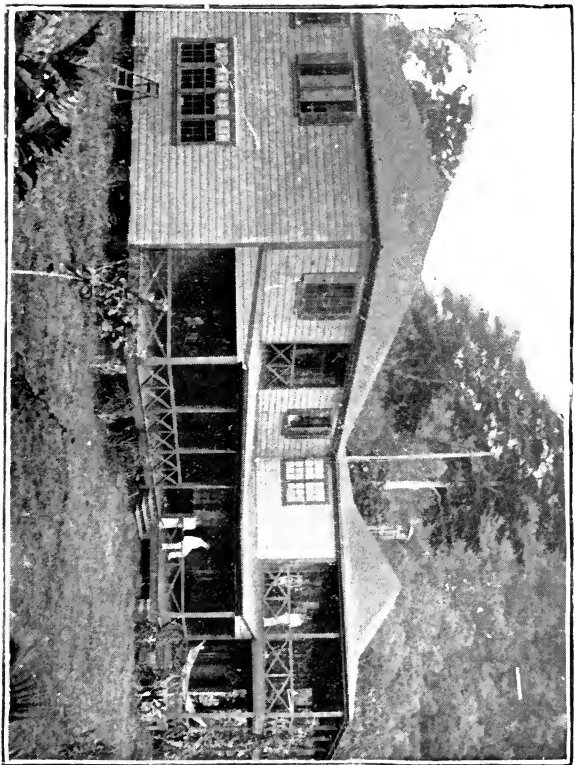
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chooses his trade to please himself, gains his livelihood by pleasing others, and has parted with something of the sterner dignity of man." The theory that all art is decoration cannot be seriously considered. It was certainly not true of Stevenson's art. He wished to please, but he had other and higher ends. He had to satisfy his exacting conscience, and he obeyed its demands sincerely and righteously, and to the utmost of his power. But he was too good a man to be satisfied even with that. Milton put into all his work the most passionate labour, but he did not believe that pleasure was the end of art. Nor would he have been satisfied by complying with his conscience. He had

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a message to deliver, and he delivered it in the most effective forms at his command. Stevenson had his message, too, and uttered it right memorably. If the message had to be put in a few words, they would be these : *Good my soul, be Brave!* He was bold enough to call Tennyson a Son of Joy, but he would have assented with all his soul to Tennyson's lines :

And here the singer for his art
Not all in vain may plead ;
The song that nerves the nation's heart
Is in itself a deed.



Stevenson's House at Vailima.



Stevenson playing his Flageolet.

*The Characteristics of
Robert Louis Stevenson*



The Characteristics of Robert Louis Stevenson

By G. K. CHESTERTON

*A*LL things and all men are underrated, much by others, especially by themselves; and men grow tired of men just as they do of green grass, so that they have to seek for green carnations. All great men possess in themselves the qualities which will certainly lay them open to censure and diminishment; but these inevitable deficiencies in the

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greatness of great men vary in the widest degree of variety. Stevenson is open to a particularly subtle, a particularly effective and a particularly unjust disparagement. The advantage of great men like Blake or Browning or Walt Whitman is that they did not observe the niceties of technical literature. The far greater disadvantage of Stevenson is that he did. Because he had a conscience about small matters in art, he is conceived not to have had an imagination about big ones. It is assumed by some that he must have been a bad architect, and the only reason that they can assign is that he was a good workman. The mistake which has given rise to this conception is one

that has much to answer for in numerous departments of modern art, literature, religion, philosophy, and politics. The supreme and splendid characteristic of Stevenson, was his levity ; and his levity was the flower of a hundred grave philosophies. The strong man is always light : the weak man is always heavy. A swift and casual agility is the mark of bodily strength : a humane levity is the mark of spiritual strength. A thoroughly strong man swinging a sledge-hammer can tap the top of an eggshell. A weaker man swinging a sledge-hammer will break the table on which it stands into pieces. Also, if he is a very weak man, he will be proud of having broken the table, and call himself a strong man

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dowered with the destructive power of an Imperial race.

This is, superficially speaking, the peculiar interest of Stevenson. He had what may be called a perfect mental athleticism, which enabled him to leap from crag to crag, and to trust himself anywhere and upon any question. His splendid quality as an essayist and controversialist was that he could always recover his weapon. He was not like the average swashbuckler of the current parties, tugged at the tail of his own sword. This is what tends, for example, to make him stand out so well beside his unhappy friend Mr. Henley, whose true and unquestionable affection afterwards took so bitter and feminine a

form. Mr. Henley, an admirable poet and critic, is, nevertheless, the man *par excellence* who breaks the table instead of tapping the egg. In his caustic article on Stevenson he entirely misses this peculiar and supreme point about his subject.

He there indulged in a very emotional remonstrance against the reverence almost universally paid to the physical misfortunes of his celebrated friend. "If Stevenson was a stricken man," he said, "are we not all stricken men?" And he proceeded to call up the images of the poor and sick, and of their stoicism under their misfortunes. If sentimentalism be definable as the permitting of an emotional movement to

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cloud a clear intellectual distinction, this most assuredly is sentimentalism, for it would be impossible more completely to misunderstand the real nature of the cult of the courage of Stevenson. The reason that Stevenson has been selected out of the whole of suffering humanity as the type of this more modern and occult martyrdom is a very simple one. It is not that he merely contrived, like any other man of reasonable manliness, to support pain and limitation without whimpering or committing suicide or taking to drink. In that sense of course we are all stricken men and we are all stoics. The ground of Stevenson's particular fascination in this matter was that he was the exponent, and the

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successful exponent, not merely of negative manliness, but of a positive and lyric gaiety. This wounded soldier did not merely refrain from groans, he gave forth instead a war song, so juvenile and inspiring that thousands of men without a scratch went back into the battle. This cripple did not merely bear his own burdens, but those of thousands of contemporary men. No one can feel anything but the most inexpressible kind of reverence for the patience of the asthmatic charwoman or the consumptive tailor's assistant. Still the charwoman does not write "Aes Triplex," nor the tailor "The Child's Garden of Verses." Their stoicism is magnificent, but it is stoicism. But Stevenson did not face

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his troubles as a stoic, he faced them as an Epicurean. He practised with an austere triumph that terrible asceticism of frivolity which is so much more difficult than the asceticism of gloom. His resignation can only be called an active and uproarious resignation. It was not merely self-sufficing, it was infectious. His triumph was, not that he went through his misfortunes without becoming a cynic or a poltroon, but that he went through his misfortunes and emerged quite exceptionally cheerful and reasonable and courteous, quite exceptionally light-hearted and liberal-minded. His triumph was, in other words, that he went through his misfortunes and did not become like Mr. Henley.

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There is one aspect of this matter in particular, which it is as well to put somewhat more clearly before ourselves. This triumph of Stevenson's over his physical disadvantages is commonly spoken of with reference only to the elements of joy and faith, and what may be called the new and essential virtue of cosmic courage. But as a matter of fact the peculiarly interesting detachment of Stevenson from his own body, is exhibited in a quite equally striking way in its purely intellectual aspect. Apart from any moral qualities, Stevenson was characterised by a certain airy wisdom, a certain light and cool rationality, which is very rare and very difficult indeed to those who are greatly thwarted

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or tormented in life. It is possible to find an invalid capable of the work of a strong man, but it is very rare to find an invalid capable of the idleness of a strong man. It is possible to find an invalid who has the faith which removes mountains, but not easy to find an invalid who has the faith that puts up with pessimists. It may not be impossible or even unusual for a man to lie on his back on a sick bed in a dark room and be an optimist. But it is very unusual indeed for a man to lie on his back on a sick bed in a dark room and be a reasonable optimist : and that is what Stevenson, almost alone of modern optimists, succeeded in being.

The faith of Stevenson, like that of a

great number of very sane men, was founded on what is called a paradox—the paradox that existence was splendid because it was, to all outward appearance, desperate. Paradox, so far from being a modern and fanciful matter, is inherent in all the great hypotheses of humanity. The Athanasian Creed, for example, the supreme testimony of Catholic Christianity, sparkles with paradox like a modern society comedy. Thus, in the same manner, scientific philosophy tells us that finite space is unthinkable and infinite space is unthinkable. Thus the most influential modern metaphysician, Hegel, declares without hesitation, when the last rag of theology is abandoned, and the last point of philosophy passed,

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that existence is the same as non-existence. Thus the brilliant author of "Lady Windermere's Fan," in the electric glare of modernity, finds that life is much too important to be taken seriously. Thus Tertullian, in the first ages of faith, said "Credo quia impossibile."

We must not, therefore, be immediately repelled by this paradoxical character of Stevenson's optimism, or imagine for a moment that it was merely a part of that artistic foppery or "faddling hedonism" with which he has been ridiculously credited. His optimism was one which, so far from dwelling upon those flowers and sunbeams which form the stock-in-trade of conventional

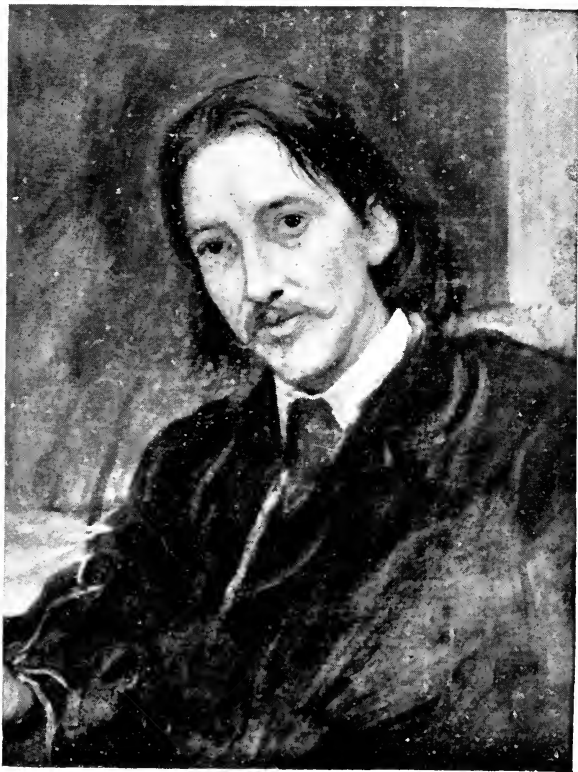
optimism, took a peculiar pleasure in the contemplation of skulls, and cudgels, and gallows. It is one thing to be the kind of optimist who can divert his mind from personal suffering by dreaming of the face of an angel, and quite another thing to be the kind of optimist who can divert it by dreaming of the foul fat face of Long John Silver. And this faith of his had a very definite and a very original philosophical purport. Other men have justified existence because it was a harmony. He justified it because it was a battle, because it was an inspiring and melodious discord. He appealed to a certain set of facts which lie far deeper than any logic—the great paradoxes of the soul. For the

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singular fact is that the spirit of man is in reality depressed by all the things which, logically speaking, should encourage it, and encouraged by all the things which, logically speaking, should depress it. Nothing, for example, can be conceived more really dispiriting than that rationalistic explanation of pain which conceives it as a thing laid by Providence upon the worst people. Nothing, on the other hand, can be conceived as more exalting and reassuring than that great mystical doctrine which teaches that pain is a thing laid by Providence upon the best. We can accept the agony of heroes, while we revolt against the agony of culprits. We can all endure to regard pain when

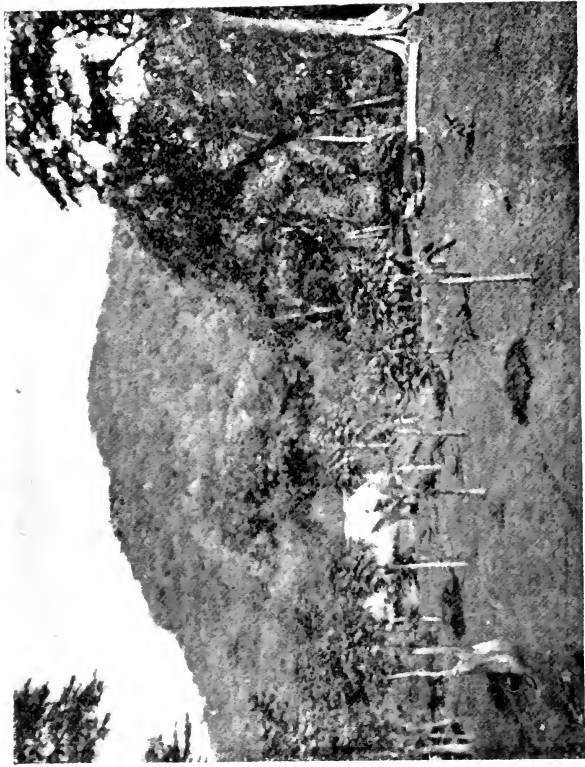
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Robert Louis Stevenson.

From a painting in the National Portrait Gallery by Sir William Blake Richmond, R.A.



The last resting-place of Robert Louis Stevenson on the summit of Mount Vaca.

it is mysterious ; our deepest nature protests against it the moment that it is rational. This doctrine that the best man suffers most is, of course, the supreme doctrine of Christianity ; millions have found not merely an elevating but a soothing story in the undeserved sufferings of Christ ; had the sufferings been deserved we should all have been pessimists.

Stevenson's great ethical and philosophical value lies in the fact that he realised this great paradox that life becomes more fascinating the darker it grows, that life is worth living only so far as it is difficult to live. The more stedfastly and gloomily men clung to their sinister visions of duty, the more,

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in his eyes, they swelled the chorus of the praise of things. He was an optimist because to him everything was heroic, and nothing more heroic than the pessimist. To Stevenson, the optimist, belong the most frightful epigrams of pessimism. It was he who said that this planet on which we live was more drenched with blood, animal and vegetable, than a pirate ship. It was he who said that man was a disease of the agglutinated dust. And his supreme position and his supreme difference from all common optimists is merely this, that all common optimists say that life is glorious in spite of these things, but he said that all life was glorious because of them. He discovered that a battle

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is more comforting than a truce. He discovered the same great fact which was discovered by a man so fantastically different from him that the mere name of him may raise a legitimate laugh—General Booth.

He discovered, that is to say, that religious evolution might tend at last to the discovery, that the peace given in the churches was less attractive to the religious spirit than the war promised outside ; that for one man who wanted to be comforted a hundred wanted to be stirred ; that men, even ordinary men, wanted in the last resort, not life or death, but drums.

It may reasonably be said that of all outrageous comparisons one of the most

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curious must be this between the old evangelical despot and enthusiast and the elegant and almost hedonistic man of letters. But these far-fetched comparisons are infinitely the sanest, for they remind us of the sanest of all conceptions, the unity of things. A splendid and pathetic prince of India, living in far-off æons, came to many of the same conceptions as a rather dingy German professor in the nineteenth century; for there are many essential resemblances between Buddha and Schopenhauer. And if any one should urge that lapse of time might produce mere imitation, it is easy to point out that the same great theory of evolution was pronounced simultaneously by

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Darwin, who became so grim a rationalist that he ceased even to care for the arts, and by Wallace, who has become so fiery a spiritualist that he yearns after astrology and table-rapping. Men of the most widely divergent types are connected by these invisible cords across the world, and Stevenson was essentially a Colonel in the Salvation Army. He believed, that is to say, in making religion a military affair. His militarism, of course, needs to be carefully understood. It was considered entirely from the point of view of the person fighting. It had none of that evil pleasure in contemplating the killed and wounded, in realising the agonies of the vanquished, which has been turned by some

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modern writers into an art a literary sin, which, though only painted in black ink on white paper, is far worse than the mere sin of murder. Stevenson's militarism was as free from all the mere poetry of conquest and dominion as the militarism of an actual common soldier. It was mainly, that is to say, a poetry of watches and parades and camp-fires. He knew he was in the hosts of the Lord : he did not trouble much about the enemy. Here is his resemblance to that Church Militant, which, secure only in its own rectitude, wages war upon the nameless thing which has tormented and bewildered us from the beginning of the world.

Of course, this Stevensonian view of

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war suggests in itself that other question, touching which so much has been written about him, the subject of childishness and the child. It is true, of course, that the splendidly infantile character of Stevenson's mind saved him from any evil arising from his militarism. A child can hit his nurse hard with a wooden sword without being an æsthete of violence. He may enjoy a hard whack, but he need not enjoy the colour harmonies of black and blue as they are presented in a bruise. It is undoubtedly the truth, of course, that Stevenson's interest in this fighting side of human nature was mainly childish, that is to say, mainly subjective. He thought of the whole matter in the

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primary colours of poetic simplicity. He said with splendid gusto in one of his finest letters : " Shall we never taste blood ? " But he did not really want blood. He wanted crimson-lake.

But of course, in the case of so light and elusive a figure as Stevenson, even the terms which have been most definitely attached to him tend to become misleading and inadequate, and the terms " childlike " or " childish," true as they are down to a very fundamental truth, are yet the origin of a certain confusion. One of the greatest errors in existing literary philosophy is that of confusing the child with the boy. Many great moral teachers, beginning with Jesus Christ, have perceived the

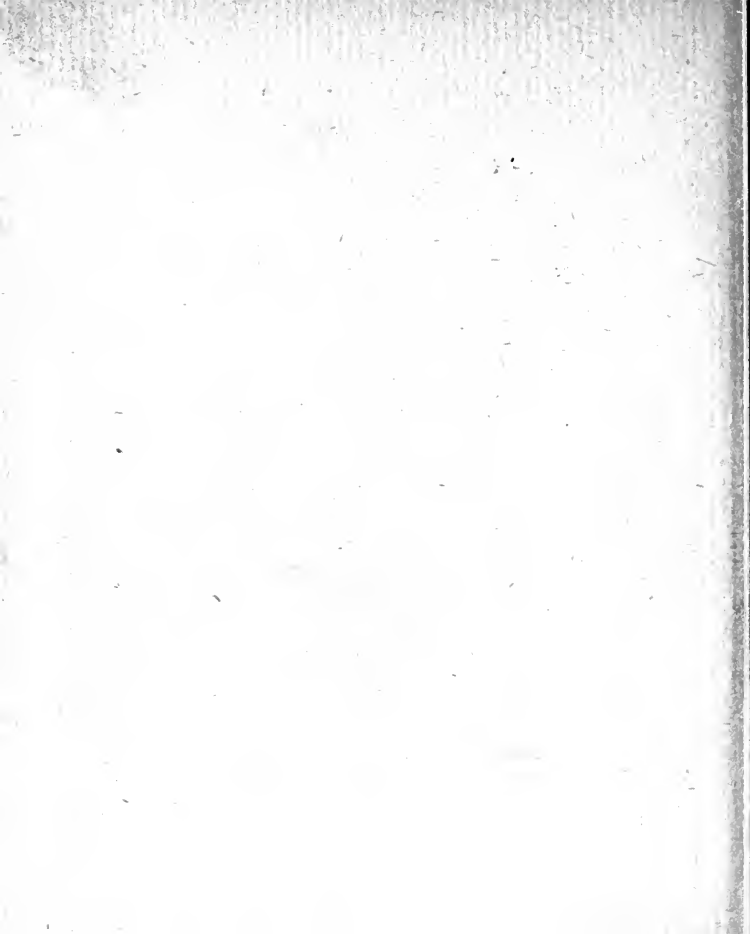
profound philosophical importance of the child. The child sees everything freshly and fully ; as we advance in life it is true that we see things in some degree less and less, that we are afflicted, spiritually and morally, with the myopia of the student. But the problem of the boy is essentially different from that of the child. The boy represents the earliest growth of the earthly, unmanageable qualities, poetic still, but not so simple or so universal. The child enjoys the plain picture of the world : the boy wants the secret, the end of the story. The child wishes to dance in the sun : but the boy wishes to sail after buried treasure. The child enjoys a flower, and the boy a mechanical engine.

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And the finest and most peculiar work of Stevenson is rather that he was the first writer to treat seriously and poetically the æsthetic instincts of the boy. He celebrated the toy gun rather than the rattle. Around the child and his rattle there has gathered a splendid service of literature and art ; Hans Andersen and Charles Kingsley and George Macdonald and Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway and a list of celebrities a mile long bring their splendid gifts to the christening. But the tragedy of the helpless infant (if it be a male infant—girls are quite a different matter) is simply this, that, having been fed on literature and art, as fine in its way as Shelley and Turner up to the age of seven, he feels within him

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new impulses and interests growing, a hunger for action and knowledge, for fighting and discovery, for the witchery of fact and the wild poetry of geography. And then he is suddenly dropped with a crash out of literature, and can read nothing but "Jack Valiant among the Indians." For in the whole scene there is only one book which is at once literature, like Hans Andersen, and yet a book for boys and not for children, and its name is "Treasure Island."



*Home from the Hill.**

By W. Robertson Nicoll.

*"Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."—R.L.S.*

Let the weary body lie
Where he chose its grave,
'Neath the wide and starry sky,
By the Southern wave ;
While the island holds her trust
And the hill keeps faith,
Through the watches that divide
The long night of death.

But the spirit, free from thrall,
Now goes forth of these
To its birthright, and inherits
Other lands and seas :
We shall find him when we seek him
In an older home,—
By the hills and streams of childhood
'Tis his weird to roam.

* First published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, February, 1895.
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In the fields and woods we hear him
Laugh and sing and sigh ;
Or where by the Northern breakers
Sea-birds troop and cry ;
Or where over lonely moorlands
Winter winds fly fleet ;
Or by sunny graves he hearkens
Voices low and sweet.

We have lost him, we have found him :
Mother, he was fain
Nimbly to retrace his footsteps ;
Take his life again
To the breast that first had warmed it,
To the tried and true,—
He has come, our well-belovèd,
Scotland, back to you !







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